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Introduction

IN 2014, AMERICAN billionaire Peter Thiel announced his plan to go into a deep freeze after death.[1] The moment he expires, a field team from the Alcor Life Extension Foundation will "swoop in and replace his blood with anticoagulants and chemicals. . . . He will then be packed on ice for transit to Scottsdale." There, he will be placed in liquid nitrogen and preserved until medical science can bring him back to life.[2] Thiel recognizes that a positive outcome is not certain, but he calls his contract with Alcor an "ideological statement" against death: "It is true that you can say that death is natural, but it is also natural to fight death."[3]

Thiel has invested millions into what he calls his "immortality project"—framing it as a fight against decadence.[4] Since the rise of the environmental movement in the late 1960s, he argues, humanity has become reluctant to use technology to master nature, to realize the power of God on earth. To recover its stature, humanity must boldly press against limits, even if it means questioning conventional ideals like democracy. In a 2009 essay defending his libertarian vision of "authentic human freedom," Thiel confessed, "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible."[5]

Thiel's example illustrates the political power of personal attitudes toward death. His opposition to death fuels his desire to

sacrifice democracy to the technological pursuit of immortality.[6] Thiel's position is shocking from a contemporary perspective. From the historical perspective of Western political thought, however, it is unsurprising. Social and political theorists have long observed an intimate tie between wanting to monopolize sovereign power and wanting to live forever.[7] Those who lust after sovereign power eventually seek power over the limits of life itself, and those who seek power over the limits of life must acquire ever greater power over technology and human populations.[8] The desire for immortality manifests itself not exclusively as a pursuit of biological indestructibility. Often it appears as a quest for historical fame.

The classical Greek historian Thucydides, for example, held that the desire for immortal glory fueled political actors' pursuit of war, expansion, and conquest. Only on the stage of imperial conflict could citizen-soldiers become political heroes and fit subjects for historical mythology.[9] The quest for immortality, ironically, motivates political actors to produce death: to kill others for the sake of cause or country.[10]

Thucydides's seventeenth-century English admirer, Thomas Hobbes, on the other hand, taught that repressing the desire for immortality was essential to peace and avoiding the bloodshed of civil war. Because that desire enflamed envy and spurred violence, humans must learn to see mortal life as inestimably valuable and prioritize collective biological self-preservation.[11] Thucydides and Hobbes illustrate the political combustibility of mortal anxiety—motivating actors to pursue chaos or impose order.[12]

The most important recent work analyzing mortal anxiety as a "mainspring of human activity" is Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death* (1973).[13] Becker spotlighted the flipside of the desire for immortality: fear of annihilation. That fear propels us to create "a hero system that allows us to believe that we transcend death by participating in something of lasting worth."[14] Ironically, most human beings pursue heroism in conformist ways: accumulating wealth, climbing the social ladder, producing

works of art that appeal only to popular taste. Becker calls this the "social hero-system," which "marks out paths for our heroism, paths to which we conform, to which we shape ourselves so that we can please others." In pursuing immortality, we abandon freedom: "We become purely external men, playing successfully the standardized hero-game."[15]

Like Thucydides, Hobbes, and Becker, this book centers on the relationship between death, politics, and freedom, but it brings into the conversation a neglected voice: the nineteenth-century American poet and essayist Walt Whitman. The book also centers on a concept implicated, but not always theorized, in the debate about death and politics: democracy. More than a century before Peter Thiel argued that democracy was a lamentable obstacle to the pursuit of immortality, Whitman suggested that the democratic soul should embrace mortality. Democracy prepares individuals, in fact, to die their own deaths, to die deaths freed of fear, resentment, and illusion. Democracy does this by destabilizing traditional authorities, especially religious authorities—loosening the hold of orthodox visions of God and heaven and opening people up to new ideas about death and divinity. Whitman, at his best, suggests that death may be a full stop, but he works to show that this is cause for neither resentment nor regret.[16]

Conversely, Whitman also suggested that reconciling oneself to mortality can make one a better democrat—more hospitable to equal freedom, more open-minded about difference. Learning to accept death makes one more grateful for earth and less hankering of heaven, more appreciative of this life and less desirous of an eternal one.[17] Affirming our mortal embodiment reduces the power that otherworldly standards of beauty and virtue have on our perception; in acknowledging the limits of our lives, we become more inclined to appreciate the all-too-human beauty and virtue of everyday life and everyday people. Accepting death, furthermore, immunizes citizens against institutions, movements, and technologies that promise an afterlife in exchange for

obedience. As literary historian Ed Folsom observes, Whitman seeks to "remove death from the grip of religions, which used superstitions about death and afterlife and heaven and hell to institute hierarchy and to control human behavior."[18] Accepting death permits freer, more questioning relationships with religious institutions, sometimes to the point of religious disaffiliation. The stakes of wanting to live forever are high. This book uses Whitman's work to explore the risks of this desire.

The Philosophical Story

Die Your Own Death is a political philosophical study of the relationship between death and democracy in Whitman's political thought. It unpacks his suggestions that (1) democracy helps reconcile us to mortality without relying on a transcendent God and (2) accepting death strengthens freedom and equality. These two claims together comprise Whitman's vision of what I call "existential democracy"—democracy as a political form that urges us to come to terms with our individuality, vulnerability, nonsovereignty, finitude, and mortality. "I exist as I am, that is enough," Whitman writes in "Song of Myself" (1855).[19] The poem's democratic egalitarian persona accepts his mortally embodied self as existentially sufficient. No longer needing redemption from either God or church, he is free to construct his own understanding of the sources and nature of existence, as well as to buck any authority using the promise of heaven and threat of hell to elicit submission. Such intellectual and spiritual freedom constitute democratic selfhood and are essential to democratic citizenship.

Democracy for Whitman is not just a form of government or a practice of politics; it is a nonconformist disposition and egalitarian way of life.[20] Its bedrock principle is equal human dignity. It holds that all individuals are morally sacred and spiritually rich. Whitman embodies democracy when he identifies as "A learner with the simplest, a teacher of the thoughtfulest . . . A prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician or priest."[21]

Democracy's faith is that the least schooled have something to teach, the most schooled something to learn. Prisoners, fancymen, and rowdies bring staggering insight from democracy's hidden corners, provoking lawyers, physicians, and priests to rethink the conventions they uphold.

At the heart of Whitman's democracy is a desire to equalize philosophical and spiritual authority. The devolution of authority away from monarchical and ecclesiastical institutions that occurred during the Protestant Reformation, English Revolutions, colonial settlement of North America, American founding, and early nineteenth-century reform movements were, in Whitman's eyes, a prelude to a more fundamental transfer of philosophical and spiritual authority to average citizens in their unsponsored, ordinary personhood. In the preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman wrote: "There will soon be no more priests. Their work is done. They may wait awhile . . . perhaps a generation or two . . . dropping off by degrees. . . . A new order shall arise, and they shall be the priests of man, and every man shall be his own priest. The churches built under their umbrage shall be the churches of men and women. . . . They shall find inspiration in real objects today, symptoms of the past and future."[22] Whitman figures nineteenth-century democratization as the logical culmination of Martin Luther's break from Rome. Just as Luther argued that "faith alone" suffices for salvation, making individuals "the freest of kings" and "priests forever" within their personal experiences of God, Whitman declares "every man his own priest."[23] He supersedes Luther by calling readers back not to the authority of scripture or local congregations, but rather to the authority of their own worldly experience, of "real objects today."

Whitman's spirituality moves beyond pantheism. In a playfully blasphemous moment in "Song of Myself," his poetic persona states, "nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's-self is." Rather than seeing God in every part of the whole, Whitman portrays the part, the individual, as equal to the maker of the

whole. Suggesting that each and every self is equal to God pushes the idea of God past the point of absurdity: if each and every self is equal to God, then God ceases to have the transcendent or totalistic characteristics defining divinity. Destroying the distinction between the divine and the mundane, Whitman suggests that reality may be all mundane. His poetic experimentation with atheism enables him to say, "Be not curious about God, / For I who am curious about each am not curious about God."[24] The glory of the mundane makes God unnecessary. Whitman further suspects that the glories of mortal life make immortality unnecessary.

The book's title—*Die Your Own Death*—evokes Martin Heidegger's famous point in *Being and Time* (1927) that every individual "must take dying upon itself."[25] Witnessing and grieving another's death is no substitute for approaching and confronting one's own.[26] This is why—Heidegger claims—that "death is always essentially my own."[27] Heidegger also thought that clear-eyed consciousness of mortality encouraged freedom. Consciousness of mortality evokes the transitory nature of wealth, status, and worldly attachment.[28] Most people try to avoid thinking of death; engaging death therefore enacts nonconformity.[29] Confronting the fact that one will die—often at an unexpected moment, not of one's choosing—forces people to grapple with the strange meanings of individuality, partiality, nonsovereignty, time, and agency.[30] Thinking of death raises the questions: What is my relationship to others? If death can separate me from those I most love, then how connected are we really? How will they remember me? Why does death strike so randomly? How should I live in light of death's caprice? How should I make use of the time that I have? What effects can I truly have on the world?

There is no evidence that Heidegger read Whitman.[31] Whitman's work nevertheless anticipates Heidegger's preoccupation with the connection between confronting mortality and living authentically. I do not offer a Heideggerian reading of Whitman.

Such a project would be disrespectful of Whitman's independent intellectual stature. I do offer an interpretation of Whitman, however, that amplifies themes that were central to the existentialist movement that Heidegger helped found: the nature of being for both the person and the species, the relationship between experience and worldliness, the role of death in how we live and how we tell the stories of our lives.[32]

The Historical Story

Whitman's views on the relationship between death, democracy, freedom, sublimity, and America were not static over time: They evolved historically in response to events—especially the Civil War and Reconstruction—and were connected to changing ideas about nation, race, and empire. Interwoven with the political philosophical study, therefore, is an intellectual historical portrait: a portrait of how Whitman's own mortal limitations—his fear of posthumous literary obscurity, his horror at the mass death of the Civil War, his increasing white supremacy—caused him to waver in his radical philosophical acceptance of mortality. During and after the Civil War, Whitman experimented with nationalist conceptions of immortality: the idea that democratic selves could live forever by merging their identities with the immortal nation. This nationalist defense against death diluted Whitman's philosophical radicalism and opened him to both racist and imperialist visions of American immortality that betrayed his democratic commitments. *Die Your Own Death* thus traces Whitman's sacrifice of an existentialist vision of death to a nationalist one on the altar of imperial white supremacy.[33]

In chapter 1, "Death as a Condition of Life," I examine the 1855, 1856, and 1860 editions of *Leaves of Grass* and analyze the relationship between their poetics of death and Whitman's democratic theory. I find that Whitman encourages his readers to adopt a metaphysical agnosticism toward death as the position most consistent with democratic self-respect. Whitman,

however, does not stake out the agonistic position directly. Rather, he guides his reader to it indirectly by offering three different visions of death designed to loosen the hold of orthodox Christian visions of heaven. First, there is the well-known vision of death as organic transformation—of bodies sinking into the ground to become the grass. Second, there is death as inspiration to creative immortality: Death urges us to write great words and do great deeds; through great work, we secure a lasting place for ourselves in human memory. Third, there is an Epicurean vision: death as a full stop that deserves not just our acceptance, but our affirmation.

The chapter concludes by showing how Whitman's antebellum philosophy of death reflects his democratic commitments. Accepting death follows naturally from accepting both nature and the self as essentially good. As democracy educates the people in their essential goodness—especially the goodness of embodiment—it teaches them to see death as a feature, not a bug, of humanity. By emptying citizens of resentment against death, democracy enables them to more fully embrace life.

Whitman's antebellum position also frames the uncertainty surrounding death—when it will arrive, whether anything comes afterward—as but one piece of the larger uncertainty intrinsic to democratic freedom. Democratic freedom involves changing governments, unsettled social relations, shaken conventions, shifting theologies, demystified authorities. Learning to deal with the uncertainties of democracy can prepare democratic individuals for the uncertainties of mortality, and vice versa. There is an elective affinity between mortalism—the affirmation of death as a full stop—and democracy.

In chapter 2, "The Civil War and the Problem of Glory," I analyze how the US Civil War challenged Whitman's antebellum philosophy of death. Through a close analysis of *Drum-Taps* (1865) and *Memoranda During the War* (1875–76), I find that Whitman sought to redeem the violent, mass death of the Civil

War by clothing it in poetic and national glory, a specifically democratic glory. Whitman believed that the martial sacrifice of the Civil War was unique because it was morally conscientious and volunteered. If he had confined this argument to the Union side, it would have made sense. Strangely, however, Whitman's Civil War writings also paid tribute to rebel courage and benevolence. Though he upheld Union sacrifice as more exemplary, he enfolded images of rebel honor within his vision of popular glory—a vision that promised immortal life in community memory.

Whitman's account of democratic glory is more racially than morally based: It reconciles the white North and the white South in fraternal splendor at the expense of both African Americans and Indigenous peoples. Whitman's Civil War sets the stage *not* for Reconstruction and its promise of racial equality, but for retreat from Reconstruction and sectionally unified white supremacy. The Civil War transformed Whitman's philosophy of death, but for the worse. It marked his turn away from a democratic mortalist humanism that celebrated human finitude to an antidemocratic national immortalism that showed contempt for finitude as it was embodied by subordinated "races."[34]

In chapter 3, "Undemocratic Vistas: Mortal Anxiety and Imperial White Supremacy," I spotlight Whitman's greatest prose work, *Democratic Vistas* (1871). Over the past half century, *Vistas* has become a touchstone of democratic theory; commentators of unusual ideological range uphold it as politically exemplary. In this chapter, I show how the celebratory portrait of *Vistas* is sanitized and incomplete. I begin by analyzing the book's two conflicting positions on death: its mortalist and immortalist positions. Paying special attention to Whitman's reading of Lucretius, I demonstrate that the immortalist position ultimately eclipses the mortalist one: Whitman sought to allay both his own and his readers' mortal anxiety by projecting an immortal American national

literature that promised himself and his fellow citizens a figurative form of immortality. The teleological, historical frame of Whitman's immortalism committed it to violations of Native sovereignty and the political inequality of Black Americans; it also entailed an expectation that Black and Indigenous people would go extinct as the white North and white South reconciled after the Civil War and forged a new American future through westward expansion and overseas imperialism.[35] *Vistas* emerges from this analysis as white supremacist in its background assumptions and political commitments—illustrating the moral defects of Whitman's vision.

In the Conclusion, I call on us to revive Whitman's mortalist vision in the fight for democracy—emphasizing how that vision survived in the work of one of Whitman's literary heirs, James Baldwin. When we combine the best of Whitman's vision with the best of Baldwin's, we have powerful resources in the struggle against racial imperialism. Mortalist acknowledgment is existentially and politically preferable to immortalist desire.

Existential Democracy

Existential democracy refers to the way confronting death strengthens freedom and equality.[36] If modern democracy entails the devolution of authority away from political, cultural, and religious elites to average citizens, then it also encourages those citizens to answer for themselves the question: How shall I live? Addressing this question, Whitman thought, required engaging death: what it was, how to conceptualize it, how to act in its light. When we accept death with humility and equanimity, we become better prepared to brave the turbulence of democratic freedom—the political uncertainties, the social disruption, the cultural flux. We also reconcile ourselves to limitation in its essential form.

This reconciliation, Baldwin observes, is a state of grace: "acceptance, totally without rancor, of life as it is, and men as

they are." Such a state a grace, however, ought not to lead to political quietism. It should instead result in a fight for the "equal power" each is due.[37] Each individual is due equal power because each is equally miraculous by virtue of their unprecedented appearance on earth.[38] Appreciating that miraculousness requires acknowledging that we are here for only an interlude.[39]

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